

Citation for published version:

Courtois, A 2019, 'From 'Academic Concern' to Work Readiness: Student Mobility, Employability and the Devaluation of Academic Capital on the Year Abroad', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 190-206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1522241>

DOI:

[10.1080/01425692.2018.1522241](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1522241)

Publication date:

2019

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in British Journal of Sociology of Education on 16th November 2018, available online:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01425692.2018.1522241>

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From ‘Academic Concern’ to Work Readiness: Student Mobility, Employability and the Devaluation of Academic Capital on the Year Abroad.

The paper suggests that a process of de-academisation is discernible in the way the Erasmus year abroad is promoted, organised, supervised and evaluated. It argues that rather than being a product of students’ consumerist rationalities, this process is produced within the conditions of the managerialised and under-resourced university. This process is underpinned by institutional discourses and practices that devalue academic capital, in line with the employability agenda and the corporate critique of higher education as outdated and too abstract for the real world. Based on a qualitative study conducted in Ireland, the article uses a Bourdieusian lens to examine the de-academisation of study abroad and the field-habitus clash experienced by participants. Finally it draws attention to the implications of this neutralisation of academic capital in a context where academic credentials are increasingly devalued on the labour market.

Keywords: Academic capital; Student mobility; Employability; Academic identity; Graduate capital; Erasmus

Introduction

In *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu examined the role played by distinct groups of third-level elite schools in the social reproduction of different segments of the French elites. Business schools, he argued, were preferred by a corporate segment characterised by high levels of economic capital and distrust for the type of cultural capital valued instead by the intellectual segment (Bourdieu 1996). Business schools emerged when educational capital became indispensable to the legitimation of dominant positions in all spheres: The corporate segment of the elites needed institutions that would provide them with appropriate credentials without being too academically demanding and without invalidating their practical, business-oriented culture. HEC, France’s top business school, achieved this balancing act remarkably well, establishing its legitimacy both as a prestigious higher education institution and as a training

ground for work-ready managers with a solid connection to the ‘real world’ as defined by economic rationality. The title of this article is inspired by a piece by Jean-Yves Abraham: ‘From Academic Concern to Managerial Seriousness: How does one Become an HEC’ (Abraham 2007). Abraham examines a paradox: After going through an extremely stringent selection process based largely on academic criteria, high-achieving students rapidly disengage from studying. Indeed, once ‘academically vetted’ by this selection, they go through a thorough re-socialisation process. They learn to distance themselves from academic norms and adopt instead dispositions better suited to the ‘real world’ of corporations, which include a more detached, instrumental attitude to disciplinary knowledge. With the complicity of faculty, the academic game is ‘neutralised’; integration and success depend instead on students’ involvement in high-profile social activities, networking skills, self-confidence and adherence to corporate values. Students bring their differentiated habitus to the school and as a result, this process of de-academisation is uneven; nonetheless it contributes to the legitimacy of HEC with the corporate sector without significantly compromising its academic reputation.

Based on a qualitative inquiry conducted in Ireland, this article suggests that the ‘year abroad’ (short-term outgoing mobility for credit as part of the Erasmus exchange programme or other institutional agreements) may play a role comparable to that of HEC in the re-socialisation and ‘de-academisation’ of students. In Abraham’s study, the devaluation of ‘academic concern’ (adherence to and compliance with academic values) makes particular sense when analysed in light of the specific location of HEC at the junction between higher education and the world of industry. However, the employability agenda reaches far beyond business schools: The whole higher education sector is now required to respond to employers’ needs by providing the labour market with work-ready graduates (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2013). In a way, the employability discourse

suggests that the higher education sector needs to be pulled away from excessive academicism and forcibly turned towards the ‘real world’. The language of skills replaces that of academic knowledge, with ‘transferrable’ and ‘soft skills’ in particular emerging as key for graduates from non-technical, non-scientific disciplines. Internships, entrepreneurship education and extra-curricular activities are encouraged as ‘the degree is not enough’ (Tomlinson 2008). The type of scholarly cultural capital associated with a humanist education is no longer considered fit for purpose: In Bourdieusian terms, it is challenged in the field that it traditionally dominated. In this perspective, the paper contends that the way that the year abroad is marketed, organised, supervised and evaluated is better understood if analysed as produced within these specific conditions. In particular, it suggests that the ‘de-academisation’ of the year abroad is a by-product of changes in funding and governance structures; but that it is also consistent with economic, rather than academic principles of legitimisation as these increasingly shape the mission of universities.

As such the article contributes to the broader critical literature on the transformations of higher education in the era of professionalisation and internationalisation. The employability agenda entrenches the divide between elite institutions forming future leaders and non-elite institutions training flexible, skilled workers (Boden and Nevada 2010; Morley 2001); while international student mobility potentially amplifies class-based differences in educational opportunities and outcomes (e.g. Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood 2011). The devaluation of academic capital is at the intersection of these two phenomena and therefore deserves specific attention. Both policy and academic literature have tended to neglect the issue of academic learning during the year abroad (Sidhu and Dell’Alba 2017, 469). This is an important topic for the ability to acquire various forms of capital is classed; in particular, non-traditional students tend to adhere strongly to academic norms even when the ‘rules of the game’ are changing, while their more privileged peers can more easily accumulate other

valuable forms of capital (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Watson 2013). The article focuses on the Erasmus programme but a similar shift away from disciplinary knowledge is also discernible in the promotion and organisation of exchange at Australian universities (Sidhu and Dell’Alba 2017). Therefore the study has relevance outside Ireland and Europe.

After locating the study within the broader theoretical literature and laying out the methods employed, the paper first contends that rather than being only a manifestation of or response to students’ supposed dispositions, the de-academisation of the year abroad is rooted in policy, practices and discourses that undermine ‘academic concern’ as narrow-minded, outdated and immature; and is therefore consistent with broader trends aligning higher education with the employability agenda. The next section examines the field-habitus clash experienced by students on their year abroad and their differentiated responses to contexts where academic capital is devalued.

The year abroad and the employability agenda in higher education: Towards a re-definition of academic capital?

Under the effect of shifts that can be broadly described as neoliberal in inspiration, the ‘year abroad’ has become a site where academic principles compete with economic principles of legitimisation. The EU-funded Erasmus exchange programme was established in 1987 to facilitate short-term student mobility, as a way of promoting cooperation and mutual understanding between European nations. It placed a strong emphasis on intercultural as well as disciplinary learning for participating students (Nørgaard 2014). The policy rationale for the programme has since shifted: in line with the knowledge economy discourse, and in sharp contrast with the humanistic rationale underpinning earlier iterations of the programme, it now emphasises employability, the needs of business and regional economic competitiveness

(Papatsiba 2009).¹ Evaluations of the impact of the Erasmus programme on participants now encompass many non-academic outcomes. These include risk-taking, self-efficacy, adaptability, intercultural communication and various other skills understood to be sought by employers (e.g. EC 2014). As a result the year abroad occupies an ambiguous position between the academic and the ‘real’ world. Under these circumstances, and given the cost of traveling and living abroad, like other non-academic activities (internships, volunteering), student mobility may be analysed as a strategy of distinction (e.g. Sidhu and Dall’Alba 2017) and/or an expression of neoliberal subjectivities and consumerist rationalities (Rivzi 2011). In addition, Erasmus mobility is now widely accepted as a time for self-development, (privileged) cosmopolitan socialising, travelling and partying (Ballatore and Federe 2013; Juvan and Lesjak 2011; Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011) – in other words, a suspended time, when ‘academic concern’ can be momentarily cast aside, and when students accumulate valuable forms of non-academic capital in line with privileged strategies of distinction.

The rise of ‘academic capitalism’ has blurred the frontier between the values of the ‘ivory tower’ and those of industry (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). In this context, the tensions between economic and intellectual values in higher education have been well documented in relation to governance (Rowlands 2017) and academic work and identities (Cribb, Gerwitz, and Horvath 2017; Harris 2005). In respect of students, it is argued that the employability agenda on the one hand, and the privatisation of the financing of higher education on the other, have contributed to re-shaping them as consumers with an instrumental approach to higher education (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005) which impacts negatively on their academic performance (Bunce 2016). However, the notion that instrumental/consumerist attitudes make students less likely to engage meaningfully with learning is contested (Tomlinson

¹ Industry placements are also offered under the Erasmus umbrella but the article focuses on study abroad.

2017a). The skills agenda has not made disciplinary knowledge redundant; for both can be reconciled (Rose 2013). Seemingly disinterested scholarly dispositions may signal a privileged habitus characteristic of those shielded from the risk of downward mobility (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979) but are also compatible with neoliberal subjectivities (Zepke 2015). Further, the distinction between emancipatory and utilitarian approaches to learning is highly ambiguous (Tomlinson 2015). Positional and transformative motivations are also deeply imbricated when it comes to study abroad (Robertson, Hoare, and Hartwood 2011) and arguably, academic motivations cut across the two. Despite these intricacies and ambiguities, a focus on academic capital is useful insofar as fluctuations in its relative value and legitimacy are indicative of broader shifts in the field of higher education, and beyond.

‘Academic capital’ (*capital scolaire*) is as a form of cultural capital accumulated primarily through formal education. It exists in different forms, the most visible of which is the educational degree (Serre and Wagner 2015). Watson employs this term to describe ‘the legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge profitable to students within the field, which ultimately [translate] into academic attainment and award’ (Watson 2013). The field is here understood as the disciplinary field, which we may assume is largely governed by academic norms specific to each discipline. Academic capital does not take the same shape in Business and say, Physics, or Modern Languages; yet it can be understood as the sum of knowledge, acquired dispositions and behaviours, that enable a student to achieve in their discipline. Watson states that academic capital translates into ‘a higher value cultural capital’ within the disciplinary field. However, what counts as legitimate capital in a given field is the product of ongoing power struggles (Bourdieu 1990; Serre and Wagner 2015). Abraham (2007) shows that the disciplinary knowledge and work ethos acquired by students during their intensive preparation are treated as illegitimate at HEC. The relative value of academic capital is not fixed, as also illustrated by Tomlinson’s model of ‘graduate capital’ (2017b),

where subject specialism and cultural knowledge compete with other types of capital (psychological, social, identity capital) in the constitution of the ‘employable’ subject. Given the rise of ‘entrepreneurial education’ in higher education, we may also suggest that academic capital is changing in nature, incorporating managerial values and other attributes defined by and for the labour market. Yet what matters in studies of cultural capital is its relational nature rather than content (Serre and Wagner 2015). Here, the term ‘academic concern’, borrowed from Abraham, refers to dispositions, representations and behaviours that are favourable to the accumulation of academic capital as described by Watson (2013). It may manifest in explicit interest in disciplinary knowledge and compliance with academic norms of judgement. In this sense, ‘academic concern’ is not devoid of instrumentalism; yet it signals adherence to – rather than rejection or detachment from – academic values. Therefore the way it is discursively framed, valued or devalued by institutional actors and students, is indicative of shifts in the legitimacy of academic capital relative to competing principles of justification.

The research

The article draws on qualitative data collected as part of a broader project that examined the motivations and experiences of Irish students participating in international exchange programmes. A questionnaire was circulated in four HEIs (N=110) as a scoping exercise. It included close-ended and open-ended questions on a broad range of topics, including students’ previous experiences abroad, motivations, expectations, sources of finance and academic experiences (workload, perceived academic benefits). 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with students returning from a year abroad and students still abroad (the latter through Skype). They lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. Participants were selected through various channels; through professional networks, at university events and among the

questionnaire respondents who had agreed to leave their contact details for follow-up interviews. As the study was qualitative, no strict sampling procedure was applied but efforts were made to include students from both genders and across a range of disciplines, destinations and reported experiences. They explored various aspects of the experience abroad as well as the decision-making process, previous experiences of mobility, family background, future study, mobility and career plans. Interviewees were also asked questions relating to their academic identities: their reasons for choosing their course initially, their perception of their disciplines and how it is taught in their home college, their studying habits, grade achievements and ambitions, and career plans. Due to the enduring economic (and in some cases, academic) selectivity of the programme, Erasmus students tend to be relatively homogeneous socially. The interview participants were from lower-middle-class to middle-class backgrounds; at least two were first-generation students and another two were self-employed mature students. In addition, interviews with international office staff and academic coordinators (faculty members in charge of recruiting students for exchange at departmental level) were conducted (N=10). The study also involved observation at events promoting study abroad and extensive documentary analysis. The present paper draws primarily on the interview material but occasionally refers to other collected data for context.²

The study does not claim to be representative. It seeks to capture the experiences of students who made explicit their desire to accrue academic capital from their experience abroad, rather than those who deliberately sought a ‘sponsored vacation’ (Juvan and Leslak 2011) – although these were also encountered in the research.³ Further, it relies on self-reporting and students’ re-constructions of their experiences, which may be influenced by

² The study received ethical approval from the funding body and participating institutions; participants gave informed consent and all have been fully de-identified.

³ Academic progress was the third most cited reason to go abroad for the questionnaire respondents, in line with findings from other surveys of Erasmus participants (e.g. E.C. 2014).

new self-concepts forged as a result of said experiences. The extent to which students' habitus is transformed by the experience remains an open question.

Contextualising the de-academisation of the year abroad

A remedy for excessive 'academic concern'?

A number of structural features at institutional level contribute to pulling the year abroad away from the realm of academic norms and judgments. In its early years, the Erasmus exchange programme required that participants continued studying their chosen subjects while abroad. They would be assessed alongside students at their host university and their grades would be transferred back and count towards their final degree. This model has given way to more flexible formulae. In Irish universities, a 'gap year model' has emerged, in which the year abroad is additional rather than integral to a degree programme. Students may choose modules unrelated to their programme and their grades are reduced to a pass/fail binary (Courtois 2018a). In this model, disciplinary norms and academic judgments (both at home and abroad) are made largely irrelevant and thus devalued.

In a context of limited resources, these practices reduce administrative workload and may be understood as the product of necessity rather than deliberate policy. Yet, they exist in conjunction with a discourse that devalues 'academic concern' as outdated, narrow-minded and detrimental to the acquisition of other forms of graduate capital. The year abroad is typically promoted as an opportunity for fun, travel, self-discovery and CV enhancement. Both the employability and the self-development discourses appeal to a specific mode of legitimisation, which aligns with the corporate criticism of higher education as too abstract, rigid and generally unfit for purpose. In one large university, international office staff lists the benefits of exchange in their presentations to students. These benefits are listed under three categories: academic, career and personal. The academic benefits include:

opportunity to study at some of the best universities in the world; chance to spend time abroad while earning credits; improving and learning a language; take new/different/more specialised courses; experience.

These ‘academic benefits’ are not strictly academic; they play into prestige, lifestyle and self-development as well. This is consistent with the broader discourse of human capital development and employability, which, unsurprisingly, permeates the presentation of the other two categories. The need to pull students away from academicism to make them more employable also surfaces in the discourse of staff, in this instance, an international officer located in a business department:

...because we always ask students to add to their degree, you know that out of the three or four years that they spend here that they don’t only do strictly academic – they know they have to pass but that they do other things, that they develop skills, you know you can be in a club or some society, some of them do volunteering with associations or whatever, so you know that they add to their degree (Staff).

The academic exchange is placed in the same category as volunteering; as a complement rather than integral part of a programme – for the academic curriculum is understood as insufficient. It needs to be supplemented through individualised portfolio-building strategies (Watson 2013). Both administrative and academic staff acknowledged the tension between a particular type of student, characterised as excessively academic, and the nature of the exchange:

We looked at that and a lot of the really really really top students don’t apply ... they’re kind of missing the bigger picture that in fact, what we are trying to teach you is that you have to be able to think outside the box and kind of – and to be able to do that you need to experience something different and kind of gain that perspective ... And sometimes you find as well that it’s kind of the middle-ground type of student as well who gets on really really well abroad ... sometimes I know that if someone has never failed before and has always been at

the top of the class they can find things difficult abroad ... sometimes it's not only the academic side; it also takes another type of skill to survive abroad, a different type of intelligence almost (Staff).

'Academic intelligence' is here constructed not only as inadequate, but also as detrimental to 'survival' in the world outside college – another nod to the conservative and corporate critique of higher education as producing graduates lacking in basic life skills and adequate dispositions.

Faculty disengagement

Internationalising activities are increasingly centralised and separated from the daily work of faculty. Exchange destinations are no longer negotiated exclusively by faculty based on research affinities; instead they are chosen by managerial and administrative staff on the basis of expected commercial or reputational benefits for the institution (Courtois 2018b). One lecturer described the work of the international office at his institution as 'crass':

Internationalising activities are increasingly governed by commercial rather than academic principles, which may also explain the relative disengagement of faculty adverse to the marketisation of the sector (Turner and Robson 2009).

The frequency of contact and quality of communication between both sides is uneven and several administrative staff members expressed their frustration with some academic coordinators. This can be understood as a consequence of increased workloads, the pressure to publish, rampant casualisation and the relative devaluation of certain tasks, in particular caring roles, of which 'looking after' Erasmus students is one (Courtois and O'Keefe 2015; Lynch, Devine, and Grummel 2012). For their part, academic coordinators pointed that their role was not valued by their departments; unlike other departmental roles, it did not weigh in the promotion process. In this sense, the disconnection of the year abroad from academic, subject-specific norms and requirements does not happen in a vacuum, nor can it be

attributed solely to students' supposed consumerist rationalities or desire for a 'sponsored vacation'⁴: It is produced within the specific conditions of the managerialised, under-resourced university, in a broader context where academics are increasingly removed from decision-making processes.

Suspending meritocratic selection processes and disciplinary requirements

The meritocratic principles that dictate the allocation of grades, the right to progress through a programme and ultimately the conferring of degrees, are momentarily suspended when it comes to the year abroad. While the more prestigious, costly and scarce places on non-EU exchange schemes are allocated on a competitive basis to applicants with top grades, the recruitment process and criteria for Erasmus places vary widely from one department to another and one course to another; and are not always transparent or indeed selective at all. Erasmus destinations are sometimes allocated on a first-come first-served basis, or by methods unknown to the students. As such, the selection process is not meritocratic in the sense understood by students unused to questioning or 'gaming' the system: One student resented the way his department allocated destinations without any justification; and another considered that a classmate of his had obtained a more prestigious destination by 'bullying' their department and therefore did not deserve it.

Where academic coordinators are involved in the process of recruiting students and allocating places, they may also set aside disciplinary-specific values and criteria. They are under pressure to increase outgoing numbers and equivalent courses may not be available at some destinations. As a result, one academic coordinator ended up accepting all applications and even 'begging' students to go, thus forsaking the academic selection he had initially

⁴ As noted by Bunce (2016) in the UK context, policy shapes students as consumers; it is not the case that the so-called student-consumer shapes policy.

envisaged. This also underscores the ambiguity of his role as an academic coordinator in the ongoing struggle between academic and institutional goals.

Upon arrival, students may find that access to modules is not determined by academic criteria either, and that their disciplinary identities (and in some cases, the basic terms of the exchange contract) are not respected. This was the case for Arthur, a social science student with a keen interest in his discipline, who had chosen his destination country based on the offer of specific modules at a particular institution:

They were the more interesting ones but they were banned – closed off to international students. Yeah, I had a lecturer recommend me to take one of them after I took one of his classes in the first semester and he asked the academic coordinator but they still couldn't open it to me (Leo, Social Science).

In this case, direct recommendation from the lecturer teaching the course did not suffice to overrule administrative constraints. These rules, dictated by a need to manage large numbers (and in some cases by a commercial rationality) ignore individual students' academic interests. William, who had carefully chosen his modules before departing, was similarly frustrated upon arrival. In his view, the commercialisation of higher education in the host country led to a situation where a 'pecking order' was in operation: Fee-paying non-EU students were prioritised, followed by local students, with Erasmus students left with a narrow and inadequate range of choices. William was particularly vocal about this commercial logic, which clashed with the meritocratic academic values he was socialised to.⁵ He was equally dismayed by the pass/fail system, which erased his hard work and excellent grades.

⁵ 25 of the 110 questionnaire respondents reported that the year abroad was not beneficial to their academic progress (but generally beneficial and enjoyable in other ways). The reason most frequently given was inadequate module content.

As a side effect of the commercialisation of international education and funding crisis, the space where students can express their intellectual curiosity and disciplinary identity is reduced. Downplaying the academic rationale for the year abroad and neutralising the ‘academic game’ helps institutions better manage students’ expectations in this respect.

Credits, leniency, inconsistencies: neutralising the ‘academic game’

ECTS credits are supposed to reflect the amount of time (both contact hours and independent study) required to complete a module or a course at a given level, for the purpose of transferability. Yet the boom in internationally mobile student numbers and the departure from a strictly academic rationale for student mobility have led some institutions to create separate, generic modules for their visiting students. Presented as introductory courses to the local language and/or culture, these are sometimes largely devoid of academic content. In some cases, the number of ECTS credits carried by these modules far exceeds that carried by other modules relative to the time and work involved:

So basically there was a list of made-up courses with credits – I’m being really honest here. And a few of them – one of them ... was really good fun but I got 6 credits for it. I got 6 credits for that course, and the [practical] course was 8 credits and the balance of them was outrageous ... I went every second Monday for an hour and I had no homework, no written work or anything ... And in the end we had to give a video to her, that we made in groups. I made it with my housemates the night before. And we had to do a written test; which she had pretty much given us a copy of it the week before and went through with us and I got 5/5 in that section, I got the top mark; we all did. Which was like – it was hilarious and our videos were just funny, they were not done seriously and the fact I got 6 credits for that was laughable (Ciara, Applied Arts).

The inconsistency between the ECTS value of ‘real’ (here, the practical course, where Ciara was the only international student) and ‘made-up’ modules undermines the relationship between work, achievements and rewards that underpins students’ understanding of the

meritocratic principles at play in higher education. Such experiences may lead students to believe that higher education is not a very serious game, and that they do not have to play by the rules to succeed. Students become aware of sharp discrepancies across destinations as they keep in touch with their classmates and compare their experiences:

Yeah, they were really pushed, it was really really hard ... and it was in their second language so they'd have tutorials and they'd have to give 40-minute long presentations in front of classes of French people and then the next day they'd have a 16-page long essay to hand in and then the next day they'd have a 4-hour long exam at 7 am or something (laughs) ...while in [other university] it was very relaxed (Fintan, Business and Languages).

Fintan no doubt exaggerates the demands placed on his classmates for comic effect, yet in his case, the grades achieved abroad counted towards the final degree: the discrepancy in standards and expectations had real consequences. A fellow student of Fintan's (whom he describes as 'a very clever girl, kind of studious and stuff') failed her Erasmus year and was forced to repeat. Her academic capital was not rewarded and may even have played against her. The meritocratic principles that students have been socialised to over their first two years in college are thus suspended or even turned around during the year abroad. Playing the game well involves making astute destination choices or manipulating the system in some way, rather than adhering to norms of behaviour usually rewarded. When the year abroad is assessed on a pass/fail basis, such consequences are neutralised:

...but then they don't have to bring back a full 60 credits. If they have 45 it's okay ... And then as I said before it doesn't count towards the degree so if they come home with a D that doesn't really matter but if they fail then nothing really happens (Academic coordinator, Social Science).

This lecturer accepts that the credit requirements, even if they provide the only evidence of academic work in a pass/fail system, are not even that important or fixed. ECTS credits

provide an academic justification that distinguishes the year abroad from other privileged forms of international travel. The suspension of the ‘academic game’ (through the adoption of the pass/fail system and leniency in its application) not only simplifies administrative processes; it also helps neutralise the more detrimental consequences of institutional inconsistencies.

Academic concern and the year abroad: a field-habitus clash

Disrupted academic identities

In many ways, the year abroad constitutes a new field for students, one where academic capital acquired through formal education is valued less than other forms of cultural capital or, for instance, social, economic or identity capital. Academic recognition (in the form of high grades or positive interactions with tutors) is particularly important for non-traditional students, who may develop a strong disciplinary identity (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). But while abroad, students are erased from their programme and cut off from their tutors at home. Faculty and administrative staff at their host university may ignore them, deny them access to certain courses or hold them to lower standards on the basis of their status as Erasmus students. They may share classes with local students but remain on the margin, like Orla, who felt that ‘we just were there to correct their English’. Students’ habitus bear the marks of their prior socialisation to the norms, values and behaviours expected at their home universities; when encountering new fields, they can experience transformation but also discomfort (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). Several students described situations of struggle and crisis. These were often due to a combination of factors (difficulties with the language, financial worries, accommodation situation and social isolation), but concerns in relation to academic progress were also present. For those who suddenly struggle to keep up academically, the injunction to make friends, travel, party and have fun (which even

academics often encourage) creates a double-bind. On the other hand, those who are insufficiently stimulated intellectually may end up ‘bored’ and isolated:

I like structure, I like knowing where I need to be and working around that and I didn’t have that. It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing but I just – sometimes I was bored to be honest, that I didn’t have a lot to do. You know I liked classes, and it’s a good place to meet people (Robert, Business and Social Science).

Robert self-describes as a serious student who enjoys college and homework; his main motivation to go abroad was to spend one more year in college. Like other Irish students, he was used to continuous assessment, frequent interactions with tutors and strictly supervised final examinations: a field dominated by academic principles that suited his dispositions. By contrast, once abroad, he had very few classes, a timetable that changed from week to week and no incentive to study. He noted that local students planned their nights out a week in advance, which he called ‘organised fun’, suggesting that social events structured his time more than college did. Having to go to college only once a week was ‘a shock’. It took him a full term to adapt to a field, where his academic capital was not only irrelevant, but was also denied a space to be deployed. Further in the interview, he stated that the year abroad made him feel more self-confident, outgoing and ready to take on his final year: an attempt to rationalise this unstructured year and to reconvert it into another form of academic capital, one based on identity capital rather than accumulated knowledge.

Adaptation, trade-offs and conversions

Disengagement under its various forms (skipping classes, doing the strict minimum, instrumental approach to module choice based on credits) is encouraged by the temporary suspension of academic norms. Mary, a high-achieving student, keen to become an academic

lecturer in her chosen subject, temporarily retreated from academic competition, but without losing sight of her long-term objective to achieve a first-class degree:

Like I try and study really hard in [home university] like going for my first, I'm really trying but over there I didn't worry about it, as long as I knew I did my best and passed I wasn't worried about my actual mark (Mary, Applied Arts).

Mary is still doing her 'best' – not abandoning her work ethos – but now displays a lack of concern for marks, which is framed as a more relaxed attitude to academic norms although arguably, it is only made possible by the neutralisation of marks in the pass/fail framework.

Most students never had to think in terms of ECTS until their year abroad. In addition to being constrained by administrative barriers, module choice becomes a bargaining process, in which intellectual and cultural interests on the one hand, and instrumental calculations on the other are weighted against one another. In this sense, the relatively narrow space for module choice is one where students can exercise agency in relation to what and how they will learn; but depending on the structure of the relevant disciplinary field, this may have detrimental consequences. Suzy, a student of Business and Languages, was confident that neglecting one of her subjects would bear no consequences because 'Business is a kind of funny subject in that you don't really need to have any knowledge really'. In Michael's case, the trade-off between his two subjects – Economics, that he dislikes, and the language he is passionate about, resulted in him failing assignments in fourth year:

Did I feel I missed out economics? Em, kind of yes, yeah, because when I came back I'd forgotten a lot of the formulas, I forgot how to do things then again I didn't really like economics so it was kind of a nice relief away. But again my mentality went against me for economics when I went away because I did fail two economics modules when I came back. So it may have been an advantage for me to stay here for economics or maybe to have done more economics in [country],

even one basic economics course to keep it going but yeah I did focus on [language] (Michael, Economics and Languages).

This suggests that favouring cultural inclinations over a more instrumental form of academic concern (focused on grades) has uncertain consequences and that the posture of cultural aesthete adopted by Michael is not necessarily rewarded by the institution. As they reflected on their academic experiences during the year abroad, students operated distinctions between various components of what can be understood as graduate capital by Tomlinson's definition (2017b):

for me it was to get something better, like different on my degree. Because more people – they had never done Erasmus and most of my friends were not gonna go ... I said I'm interested in going, I want to improve - not my proficiency, I don't know how to explain that but my degree itself (Seamus, Social Science)

Seamus would like to pursue an academic career, which suggests a high level of adherence to academic values, yet he sought to acquire other unspecified forms of capital that would make him 'different' and therefore more employable. He suggests that academic capital in its institutionalised form ('the degree itself') does not encompass or demonstrate all the potentially desirable forms of knowledge and skills. Further unpacking academic capital, he made a distinction between experiential and academic learning:

My academic and stuff I had to do – you learn stuff about [host country] and that's ok, but most of my learning was from interactions and experiences, not books. But that's what I went there for; [home university] is more for books but Erasmus is to gain something completely new. New ways of learning, new friendships, new experiences (Seamus, Social Science).

Seamus gave particular importance to local students' views on their own country, as a better way to understand the national culture compared to what he was taught in lecture halls. He

thus devalued conventional ways of learning, suggesting that academic teaching was too abstract and disconnected from reality.

The year abroad opens the legitimacy of disciplinary requirements to questioning, demystifying the academic game by making visible its flaws, inconsistencies and arbitrary nature. Students may as a result become critical of rules they had so far unquestioningly abided by:

I was stressed out about the exams and how they were going and I just got to the point when I said I don't care, I'm still learning here even though I'm failing the written parts. Once I felt I was learning [language] and becoming good at it and understanding what people were saying to me I stopped caring about the exams. It was the best I could do you know because the stress of them was really getting to me you know ... There was one time when exams were going really bad and I thought I'm gonna fail miserably. I thought I may just cut my losses but then I thought I'm actually learning outside of it so I just need to focus and learn as much as I can and forget about the marks on paper. Once I realised that I started making progress and that helped (Duncan, Modern Languages).

For the sake of his mental health, Duncan changed the rules of the academic game, deciding that he himself should assess his own progress, rather than lecturers. Duncan had so far given enough credence to academic judgments to choose his college subjects (and his future career as a teacher) based on his grades in secondary school. But at a point of crisis, he questioned the validity of the grading system and subject requirements. In the case of language students, experiential learning is more easily converted into academic capital as students with improved fluency can expect better grades once they return to their home institution. However, Duncan's career plans also changed: his experience led him to consider using his language skills in the private sector, which might indicate a more significant shift in his

habitus. His detachment from ‘academic concern’ and his contestation of academic judgments also echo the transformation operated on HEC students (Abraham 2007).

Reclaiming academic identities

With the neglect of Erasmus students, the limited access to modules and the proliferation of ‘made-up courses’, many do not find in their new environment the motivation to maintain their academic identities and as a result, disengage to various degrees. However, rather than doing less, some students do more, viewing the year abroad as an opportunity to engage in academic self-formation:

I think if you take art down to the very basic it’s all down to composition and I felt they had a much stronger emphasis on learning to draw properly while here we don’t have drawing classes, like old-fashioned drawing classes ... it’s all so stylistically loose so I felt it’s important to learn how to do things properly and then I can choose to go away from it if I want but at least I know (Alana, Applied Arts).

Also three years is too short a time to do what I’m studying so to take the extra year abroad – I thought it would be excellent as well – because there’s a big divide in philosophy between Europe and North America so I thought it would be interesting to get a North American perspective on what I’m studying (Leo, Social Science)

For both, disciplinary interest extends beyond the academic requirements defined by the home university. They consider that their practical (Alana) or intellectual (Leo) training in their subjects would not be complete if it was limited to the duration of a degree, or if it was limited to a local perspective. By questioning the way their programmes are organised, both display a critical distance from the academic requirements and norms defined by their institutions – which in a sense, suggests a willingness to re-appropriate their disciplines.

Some students actively resisted the negation of their academic identities. William for example, one of many to be denied access to chosen courses, demanded to talk to a departmental manager; he eventually obtained a place on the courses he wanted (by contrast, Leo, a younger, first generation student, did not succeed). A mature student, he deplored the lack of engagement of his younger classmates in lectures. William asserted his academic identity, using his age ('being an older lemon I would have had a bit of a different reason to do things, not just a vacation; I had more motivation for it'). For her part, while she felt marginalised at first, Alana persisted until she was recognised as a full participant in her class:

Some tutors hated Erasmus students. They didn't want them in the class because some of them – and part of me understand why ... some people were treating the Erasmus year as 'oh I can try everything', like a taster but some techniques are just too complicated to be able to drop in and drop out and also the ones that were very language-based, like theory, they don't want people who can't speak the language but at the same time I was really determined and kept turning up until they accepted me (laughs) (Alana, Applied Arts).

Alana's motivations to go on Erasmus were academic and intellectual. Her destination appealed for its classical architecture and the abundance of art galleries, which she connected to her academic interests. She followed language classes assiduously. In this excerpt, she sides with the tutor rather than with fellow Erasmus students, thus displaying her affinity with those who embody academic norms rather than with those who transgress them. She was delighted to eventually overcome the language barrier and gain respect from both her classmates and tutors for her achievements; in a sense, she conquered another academic territory marked by different norms and practices and her academic confidence increased as a result. In this respect, William and Alana were exceptions in that they were successful in reclaiming their academic identities *despite* their Erasmus status. Yet this required struggles

that not all students are equipped to wage. Both were self-employed mature students, better able, perhaps for these reasons, to affirm non-instrumental attitudes to academic knowledge.

Conclusion

Students' disengagement from studying while on the year abroad is often interpreted as a product of consumerist rationalities and/or privileged habitus in the context of the marketisation of higher education. The paper has argued that in a context of diminished resources and under the pressure of the employability agenda, the year abroad is organised and evaluated in a way that undermines academic norms and values, irrespective of students' inclinations – and that students may in fact resist rather than embrace this agenda.

Institutional discourses and practices make discernible a conception of academic capital as outdated at best, and counterproductive at worst, which resonates with the corporate critique of higher education. The devaluation of subject-specific knowledge and suspension of academic norms, judgment and reward mechanisms are underpinned by a discourse that undermines what is constructed as excessive academicism. In this context, the year abroad takes on a function similar to that of internships or volunteering, allowing students to improve their 'graduate capital' and to demonstrate that they can navigate the 'real world'. As in HEC (Abraham 2007), growing out of 'academic concern' is an important element in this transformation.

The effect on students is uneven. Disengagement, bargaining, conversion and re-appropriation of academic identities are some of the ways students react to a new field, where they find the rules of the game deeply changed, and their academic capital undermined or made irrelevant. In these processes, the value and composition of academic capital are questioned and refashioned, and some go some way towards adopting the dominant view according to which higher education is too abstract and disconnected from the 'real world'. In

this respect, the desired effects of the year abroad align with those of the business schools described by Bourdieu (1996) and Abraham (2007): values imported from the economic world are legitimised and students are (partially, unevenly) socialised to these values.

The small size and relative homogeneity of the sample makes it difficult to extrapolate on the impact of social class (or gender or subject area) on students' adaptation to change based on the data alone. However the difficulties encountered by some students in the sample resonate with the experiences of working-class students faced with the injunction to mobilise diverse forms of capital that they felt ran counter to their conception of academic merit (e.g. Watson 2013). In addition, the study suggests that students who can mobilise other social and cultural resources are better able to navigate and adapt to – or on the contrary, to contest and challenge – unfamiliar dynamics. In this sense, the discursive devaluation of 'academic concern' ignores students' socially differentiated starting points and reinforces the myth of giftedness and natural ease denounced by Bourdieu (1996).

The findings align with Zepke's (2015) and Tomlinson's (2015) contention that cultural/transformational and instrumental/positional motivations are difficult to untangle. It is equally difficult to discern which, if any, has legitimacy in the current configuration of the year abroad. Importantly, focusing on the relational nature of academic capital rather than on its content is useful in highlighting how the 'year abroad' is being shaped into a field dominated by principles antagonistic (or indifferent) to academic values. The focus on academic capital, understood not only as credentials but as knowledge, skills and dispositions typically rewarded in the academic world, makes visible the significance of the de-academisation of the year abroad and how it relates to the progress of the professionalization and employability agendas in higher education.

Ultimately, how exactly academic capital may run counter to adaptation to the workplace, as in a zero-sum game, is unclear: Above all, the opposition of academic/cultural

and professional/economic capital is a manifestation of the continuing symbolic struggle within the field of higher education. The relative devaluation of academic norms and values in favour of a more ‘hands-on’ approach helps legitimise institutions frequently attacked for failing to meet the needs of the economy. It can be seen as a manifestation of the ongoing reconfiguration of the relationship between higher education and the labour market. As suggested by Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2013) and Sukarieh and Tannock (2017), the devaluation of academic capital plays another role, that of undermining university degrees and justifying lower salaries – or unpaid internships – for entrants to the graduate labour market. Students themselves learn to argue that ‘looking at books’ is not enough; while their faith in the workings of academic meritocracy, or in the value of disciplinary knowledge outside an Irish classroom, is shaken. If graduates understand there is little value in academic capital, they may be less likely to defend their entitlement to well-paid work based on their disciplinary knowledge, and become more ‘work-ready’ in this sense.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Dr Theresa O’Keefe and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions. Funding from the National University of Ireland is gratefully acknowledged.

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